

# THE SCOTTISH COVENANT

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*"WE, the people of Scotland who subscribe this Engagement declare our belief that reform in the constitution of our country is necessary to secure good government in accordance with our Scottish traditions, and to promote the spiritual and economic welfare of our nation.*

*"We affirm the desire for such reform is both deep and widespread throughout the whole community, transcending all political differences and sectional interests and we undertake to continue united in purpose for its achievement.*

*"With that end in view we solemnly enter into this Covenant, whereby we pledge ourselves in all loyalty to the Crown and within the framework of the United Kingdom, to do everything in our power to secure for Scotland a parliament with adequate legislative authority in Scottish affairs."*

That is the document to which, during the last six or seven months, well over a million of the adult population of Scotland have appended their signatures. That so many Scots could be found prepared to sign such a document has startled many people outside Scotland, who had assumed that the Scottish people, for the past two centuries had been contentedly digesting the blessings conferred on them by the Parliamentary Union of 1707, seasoned perhaps by local sauce in the form of tartan, Gaelic, and the songs of Burns.

How has this thing come about? The answer is that it is the result of a remarkable movement of the mind of Scotland during the past thirty years. To describe that movement one is tempted to adopt the technique of the old-fashioned historical novel. The Story would then begin somewhat in this way:

One fine morning in the spring of 1919 a young man in the uniform of one of the Scottish infantry regiments descended from a London train at the Caledonian Station, Edinburgh, and, gathering up a battered valise, made his way to a taxi which was soon carrying him through the hard grey streets of the northern capital to the home of which he had seen so little during the past five turbulent years—

After that the story would go on to tell of the atmosphere of a Scottish University (Edinburgh in this case) during the years succeeding the first World War. It was a university crowded with ex-service men furiously making up arrears of work, and

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there was not much time for them to think of the affairs of Scotland. Most of them took Scotland for granted and assumed that Scottish affairs could look after themselves, that "there would always be a Scotland"; and meantime, if they engaged in the controversies of students' societies, they concerned themselves with larger matters than the condition of their own country—with reconciliation with Germany, with the prospects of the new Poland and Jugo-Slavia and Czecho-Slovakia, and with the future of the infant League of Nations.

But the affairs of Scotland gradually forced themselves on the attention of at least some of these students. Those of a literary turn became aware of the issue of *Northern Numbers*, a series of books published by Mr. C. M. Grieve, (now better known under his poetic pen-name of "Hugh Macdiarmid" which contained selections from the works of living Scottish poets. These raised an interesting question. Had we, then, any living Scottish poets? Had the last Scottish literary figure of any consequence not been buried in Samoa in 1894. If that was so, why was it so? Scotland had once had a literary output of which any country could be proud. What had happened to it? So here and there, in student conversations in Union and quadrangle, the talk began to turn to what was wrong with Scotland. And some of the students even, in a fine quixotic spirit, resolved to do something about it.

Two of them—George Malcolm Thompson and Roderick Watson Kerr—had hardly graduated and begun their way in journalism when they began to spare time to issue, from an attic in an inconspicuous west-end street, the *Porpoise Press* booklets, which gave the curious reader samples of the poetic work of Marion Angus, Violet Jacob, Lewis Spence, Alexander Gray, "Hugh MacDiarmid", William Ogilvie, and the young Eric Linklater, and others. They were sufficient to show that modern Scotland had "gotten poets o' her ain", and perhaps to inspire younger men with an ambition to carry on the good work.

George Malcolm Thompson followed up his *Porpoise Press* work with a publication that may be regarded as the "first blast of the trumpet" of the new Scottish movement, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots* (1926). This little book was calculated to make the most complacent Scot realise the "staggering state" into which his country had fallen. It told of declining population, of horrible housing conditions, of deplorably high infant mortality rates, of the decline of Scottish culture, and—a more recent phenomenon—of the decay of Scottish industry,

hastened by the absorption of Scottish concerns (the railways being among the most important) in corresponding English ones. Its effect on thoughtful Scotsmen was shown in a speech made by John Buchan shortly after its publication, to the Scottish Conservative Club. He had been reading the book, he said, and it had made him feel that one of the things the Scottish Conservatives would have to conserve was Scotland itself.

Soon after this things began to move in the political field. In 1928 the Rev. James Barr, the Labour M.P. for Govan, introduced a bill to give self-government to Scotland, leaving Foreign Affairs and Defence to joint administration. It met with the usual fate of such bills, receiving a first reading and going no further. Soon afterwards the National Party of Scotland was formed, by a group of believers in Scottish Home Rule who saw no hope of action by any of the orthodox political parties.

Then, in the early months of 1929, a mild shock was administered to Scottish newspaper readers by the announcement that, in the election of their Lord Rector by the students of Glasgow, the Prime Minister, Mr. Stanley Baldwin, had just scraped home by a very small majority over his Scottish Nationalist opponent, Mr. R. B. Cunninghame Graham. This led to a good deal of speculation. Was it just a students' ploy or something more serious? Subsequent events have shown that there *was* something more serious behind it. It undoubtedly reflected rising national feeling in the youth of Scotland, but it was also evidence of the powers of organisation and inspiration of the Nationalist leader, a young law student called John MacCormick, who is now the Chairman of the Covenant Committee. Three years later Mr. Compton MacKenzie was elected the first Nationalist rector of Glasgow university.

It was a very different story however when the new Nationalist party started to fight parliamentary elections, In 1929, soon after the Glasgow Rectorial election in which Cunninghame Graham was the unsuccessful candidate, Mr. Lewis Spence, poet and journalist, sought a by-election in North Midlothian, but secured only 800 votes. Subsequent attempts were not much more successful. The new party, like all new parties, lacked funds, lacked effective organisation, and lacked unity; and even electors who were sympathetic to the party's general point of view were probably inclined to think that the election of the few candidates the party could afford to put into the field would do little to solve the urgent problems that were pressing Scotland at the time. These sporadic efforts however

were not entirely fruitless. They forced Scotsmen to think seriously about the state of their country, and it is significant that the new movement was backed by most of the creative writers of Scotland.

Meantime the condition of Scotland was calling for attention with a more imperious voice. Britain was moving towards the financial crisis of 1931; and Scotland, along with Wales, felt the cold blast sooner and more intensely than England (though it has to be remembered that certain industrial areas of England, like Tyneside, felt it too.) This was due to Scotland's lop-sided economy, with its dependence on heavy industries like engineering and shipbuilding, its lack of light industries to which labor might be transferred, and its neglected rural areas, which were being rapidly depopulated. Scotland in the early 1930's was a country of crowded industrial areas, with the greater part of their male inhabitants unemployed, surrounded by vast areas of underpopulated country from which the tide of life was receding. The Clyde shipyards has gone idle; the blast furnaces had been damped down; and yet from the highland and lowland glens and straths the stream of young life was still flowing to the cities, to England, and overseas.

One result of these tendencies was shown in the figures of the census taken in 1931. They showed that, for the first time since 1801, when census figures were first compiled in Scotland, the population of the country declined—from 4,882,497 in 1921 to 4,842,980 in 1931. In the same year the unemployment statistics showed that, of the insured workers in Scotland, 26.6 per cent were unemployed—as against 21.1 per cent for the whole of Britain. And in the years between 1921 and 1931 Scotland had lost by emigration 8 per cent of its population.

Of course all this may have been due to things quite apart from Scotland's political relationship with England. The country's lop-sided economy could be blamed; it could be said that the unhealthy state of trade and industry in Scotland as compared with England was due to the inevitable fact that the extremities feel the cold before places nearer the heart; and it may even have been that the decline was not entirely unconnected with a decline in Scottish business enterprise. But many Scotsmen, rightly or wrongly, began to think that there might be other reasons. One that seemed very obvious was a practice that had grown up in the lean years under the curiously undescriptive name of "Rationalisation". This meant the centralisation of industries under one control, and that control

nearly always exercised from London. The result was that, again and again in those days, one read of Scottish factories being closed down on the ground of economy and the work being concentrated in the south—and not everybody was so lucky as merely to read about it in the papers. So people began to have an uneasy feeling that powerful forces were at work to prevent Scotland from earning her own living. At the same time it looked as if it was quite impossible to get any coherent policy set on foot for dealing with the problems of the country. These, it appeared, could not possibly be given the attention they deserved by parliament sitting in a town as near to Luxembourg as to the nearest point on the Scottish Border, and as near to Nuremburg as to the extreme north of Scotland—to say nothing of Orkney and Shetland. There was here fertile soil for the growth of nationalist sentiment, and it did grow.

The approach of War, and the War years themselves, put some of the causes of complaint into the background. The Clyde shipyards started up again; engineering works and steel works got busy on the preparation of war material; and unem-conditions the employment of Scottish resources in the war effort seemed to be hampered. The government found it convenient to devote factory space in Scotland to storage purposes to a far greater extent than to actual production, so that work that people felt might quite well have been done in Scotland was still carried on in England. One result of this was the direction of labor—particularly female labor—from Scotland to England, a process that aroused widespread and bitter dissatisfaction in Scotland, a dissatisfaction that Mr. Herbert Morrison, the minister chiefly responsible, found it quite impossible to understand.

In one important respect Scotland was better off during the War; that was in the administrative field. Mr. Thomas Johnston, who was Secretary of State for Scotland during most of the War years, kept in close touch with public feeling, with the result that, though under War conditions the government was a kind of benevolent dictatorship yet the affairs of Scotland seemed to be attended to with unwonted energy and thoroughness, and the link between the ordinary Scot oppressed by a grievance or hatching a new project and the responsible officials who could deal with such matters seemed to be much more direct, so that people began to lose the sense of frustration that had so long afflicted them.

But the nationalist movement had not been laid to sleep. In the years before the war the National Party had suffered from dissension between those members who favored Devolution to Scotland by the British Parliament of purely domestic Scottish affairs and those who wanted something more thoroughgoing, a Scotland independent of England, though working in harmony with it under some kind of federal arrangement. The essential difference was that the one section regarded the political unit of Great Britain as the norm, and the new arrangement as a modification of it; while the other section started with the postulate that England and Scotland were separate nations, however much they might have become politically interlocked, and maintained that their future relations must be determined on that basis. By the time War broke out, the National party, owing to secessions by upholders of the Devolutionary school of thought, had become largely representative of the more thoroughgoing nationalists.

In 1942 there came a crisis in the affairs of the Party when it elected as its chairman a very thoroughgoing nationalist in the person of Mr. Douglas Young, Lecturer in Greek at Aberdeen University, and one of the most prominent of the younger Scottish poets, who had, on Scottish patriotic grounds, refused to submit himself for medical examination for the Services and suffered imprisonment in consequence. This led to the final secession, under Mr. John MacCormick—the organiser of victory at the Glasgow University Rectorial election thirteen years before—of those members of the Party who held more moderate views and who felt that the identification of the National Party with half-hearted views about the conduct of the War would be fatal to its prospects. They formed a body called Scottish Convention, which, for the time, abandoned direct political action and concentrated on propaganda—on the gradual permeation of the country with their views, somewhat after the manner of the Fabian Society in its early days.

Despite these dissensions the National movement grew in strength during the War years. In 1940 Mr. William Power, a veteran Scottish journalist and one of the founders of the movement, fought a by-election in Argyllshire and polled the respectable total of 7300 votes; in 1943, at a by-election at Kirkealdy, the Labor candidate (who, under war-time coalition conditions, had the support of both the orthodox political parties) just scraped home over his Nationalist opponent Mr. Douglas Young; and in 1944 Dr. Robert McIntyre was elected Nation-

alist member of parliament for Motherwell, and soon afterwards made his somewhat reluctant bow before a perplexed House of Commons. This electoral success was short-lived, however. At the General Election of 1945, Dr. McIntyre lost his seat, and the few other candidates whom the National Party could afford to put up were equally unsuccessful. The same thing happened at the election in February this year.

Yet there have been many indications that the votes given to Nationalist candidates have not represented the strength of the Scottish people's desire for some kind of effective control over their own affairs. Nationalist candidates always have the same tale to tell: of a cordially sympathetic reception of their main thesis followed by the election of one of their opponents. It may be possible to explain this odd phenomenon merely by the amiable desire of electors not to send away the candidate and his canvassers with sore hearts, but it is probably due more to the feeling that the National Party, with its handful of candidates, does not seem practical politics. Perhaps, too, the extreme form of Nationalism advocated by the Party alienates voters who might be prepared to go a good way along the road on which it seeks to lead them.

However that may be, one has become more and more conscious during the years succeeding the War of the number of people who prefix remarks on the condition of Scotland with "I am not a Nationalist, but—". Other, more tangible, things have tended to make it appear likely that the minds of the government—an experimental plebiscite held in the little town of Kirriemuir, for instance, and two resolutions carried by large majorities at the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland in 1948 and 1949 in favor of a Government enquiry into the question of Scottish Devolution. But the actual strength of Scottish self-government feeling was a matter of pure conjecture till Scottish Convention took effective action to test it.

In 1947 Convention sent out invitations, to local authorities, trade unions, cultural bodies and to the churches, to send representatives to a "Scottish National Assembly" in Glasgow. The invitation met with a surprisingly good reception and the Assembly was attended by about 600 members, representative of all aspects of Scottish life. It appointed a committee to draw up the outline of a practicable scheme of Scottish self-government, and this committee reported to a second Assembly, held in Edinburgh in 1948. Its proposals were accepted with almost complete unanimity, and the Committee of the Assembly was instructed

to convey them to the Prime Minister with a view to legislative sanction.

Mr. Attlee declined to meet the Committee and referred them to Mr. Woodburn, the Secretary of State for Scotland. Mr. Woodburn, though he described the proposals as the most reasonable of their kind yet submitted, refused to go any further with them, on the ground that there was no evidence of any strong and widespread desire for self-government in Scotland. The leaders of the National Assembly then decided to provide the evidence by framing a National Covenant, stating in simple terms the broad lines of their self-government policy, and seeking signatures for it throughout the country.

In October 1949 the third National Assembly met in the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, approved the Covenant with only one dissentient voice, and sent it on its way. The result was startling, even to the most hopeful supporters of the Covenant. Handfuls of harrassed voluntary workers at the Covenant offices in Glasgow and Edinburgh found themselves coping with something like an avalanche, with constant streams of callers and with letters from all over Scotland demanding copies for signatures; and, when the Fourth National Assembly met in the Assembly Hall on 22 April this year, it was announced that the signatures numbered 1,236,000. It was unanimously resolved by the thousand delegates present that Commissioners should be appointed to seek conferences with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, and that if nothing came of these approaches the King should be petitioned directly.

These approaches have not been made. At the time of writing (22 May) Mr. Atlee has made no public reply and Mr. Churchill, at a public meeting addressed by him in Edinburgh on 19 May, has indicated that, while prepared to effect administrative reforms, he is not prepared to modify the Act of Union. What the Covenant leaders' next move will be remains to be seen. Meantime, the movement has demonstrated that a very large proportion of the people of Scotland want some form of self-government, and people who have conducted systematic direct canvasses put the proportion at about eighty per cent. This desire is felt by the people of all parties and of no party at all—the all-important floating vote. At the last General Election the Covenant Committee wisely refrained from bringing the question into the party conflict, their desire being to keep a united front and to achieve their end by converting either or both of the two larger parties. If they fail to convert them, and



if they are able to direct the votes of their million and more supporters at the next election their influence may, in the present finely balanced political situation, be decisive.

Meantime the Covenant stands up as a very definite fact—a “chief that winna ding.” Less than twenty years ago Scottish Nationalism was regarded as a movement of no serious significance—a thing for poets and cranks. That attitude, though the poets happily are still with the movement, is no longer possible. Those who have taken part in the proceedings at recent assemblies include the Duke of Montrose, one of the most highly respected men in Scotland; Mr. John Cameron, the Dean of the Faculty of Advocates; Mr. James Bridie, Scotland's leading dramatist; Lord Mansfield, one of the most able of the Scottish peers; Mr. A. D. Gibb, K.C., Professor of Scots Law at Glasgow University; and others of like calibre. These are not men of straw.

The movement is a reaction against definite economic and social pressures caused by the centralising tendencies of present day business and government, but it is more than that. It is a revival of Scottish national consciousness such as has not been seen since the Act of Union of 1707.